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Meditation on the Shepherd

Psalm 23

John 10: 11-18

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If you're wondering why you keep hearing scripture readings and songs and hymns that make reference to sheep and lambs and shepherds, that's because today in the Christian liturgical calendar is Good Shepherd Sunday. We've focused on this several years in my time with you, and every time we do, I notice that whenever the readings focus on shepherds and sheep, few of your eyes light up, which is rather strange because here is one of the enduring images for Christians – the Good Shepherd, One who loves his sheep, lives for his sheep, lays down his life for his sheep – and there's, what . . . a yawn? A scratch of the head? Another doodle on the Sunday morning bulletin?

Of course, for some of you, I now that this is a tremendously meaningful image, how you may have even seen shepherds and sheep in action, so you know what we're talking about. But I also know that many of you are like me: you've either never seen a real shepherd or maybe once or twice and only from a distance. And I'll bet that there's not too many of us sitting here who have seen a shepherd or a sheep in real life lately. They are nice at Christmastime to put in our crèches but, come on . . .

So, this morning I see my task as two-fold. First of all, to look at why the shepherd image has been kept alive for Christians through the ages and why it has lost its turn-on for most moderns. Secondly, I want to ask what this image has to say to us today, or at least to look at it again and perhaps help make some sense to those of us whose prime exposure to shepherds is on a Christmas card.

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First, the reason this image has been kept alive through the ages is for one simple reason: the role it plays in the Bible. In the Old Testament, God is seen as Israel's shepherd, leading, as numerous Psalmists sing, the people "like a flock." That's precisely what the first lines of Psalm 23 are getting at:

"The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want;
He makes me to lie down in green pastures,
He leads me besides still waters,
He restores my soul."

(Psalm 23: 1-2)

God is like a good shepherd who cares for the flock. You'll notice that these images, this poetry, comes from Israel's own history. Remember, the context of the Bible is an agrarian society, much of it a nomadic existence, in which sheep raising and shepherding were the essential stuff of life. This is why a dying Jacob, a shepherd himself, spoke of "the God who has shepherded me all my life long to this day" (Genesis 48: 15). Or, as the author of the 78th Psalm sings, recounting the Exodus story, God led us "like a shepherd, [Who] guided us in the wilderness." When Jerusalem had been laid waste and thousands led off into exile in Babylon, God through the prophet Ezekiel proclaims: "I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep. . . . I will seek the lost and bring back the strayed . . ." (Ezekiel 34:15-16). And that is precisely what happened: God gathered the remnant of Israel, set them together "like sheep in a fold," according to Micah (2: 12); and "restored Israel to pasture" (Jeremiah 50: 19).

New Testament times were a bit more urban but most still lived very close to the land and were intimately familiar with the life of shepherds. (By the way, it's highly likely that shepherds themselves were not viewed very highly by their contemporaries. In fact, some scholars believe that by the time of the New Testament, shepherds were considered unclean, "sinners" as we read in the Gospels, a category of people who were excluded from full participation in the life of the community, especially from the Temple. If that is the case, the author of Luke is making an extraordinary statement when he writes that the angels appeared to shepherds with the great good news of Jesus' birth!). In spite of such a contemporary view of shepherds or maybe because of it, Jesus is the one who takes on the image of shepherd most profoundly. He saw himself as "sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel," in Matthew (15: 24), and sent by God to give the kingdom to his "little flock," according to Luke (12: 32). He is, in the Gospel reading, "the good shepherd, who "lays down his life for his sheep."

The Bible is loaded with it – and so is our Christian tradition. So, why doesn't this image turn many people on today? Why doesn't it make much sense? One reason: our particular experience. All images have to have rootage in our culture, or our personal or family experience or history, to make much sense to us, to have much meaning. And shepherds don't loom large in our everyday lives. We don't see sheep chewing up the grass at Bushnell Park or the Reservoirs followed by Bedouins – geese do, but not sheep. Sure, we resurrect them at Christmastime, "keeping watch over their flocks by night." But basically, that's it. Maybe if we lived in New Zealand which has about 20 sheep for every person; but not here, not in 21st century America, and certainly not in southern New England.

That's one reason for our troubles with sheep as a meaningful image – it's just not part of our experience. But another reason, and perhaps more importantly, is the symbol, what sheep actually do. If you think about sheep, what do you see in your minds eye, and ear? "BAAAAA!!" Other than that, they

don't say anything. They do exactly what they are told. They panic easily. They don't lead, they follow. If they haven't enough sense to follow, a sheep dog will keep them all in line and nip at their hooves. And the dictionary calls a person a sheep if you are "meek and submissive."

So, good Christians: do you like that image for yourself? Isn't that a flat out conflict with who we are created in the image of God? We aren't dumb and submissive – we're free and creative. Most of us don't mind following, but the leader better know what in the world she or he is doing, and we most certainly don't want to be led by the nose. And most of us have at least a healthy respect for authority, but who wants to have sheep dogs snapping your heels?

The point? No one should be surprised if the images of shepherd and sheep fail to do it for you. Symbols, remember, don't exist in a vacuum; they either symbolize or they don't; they either grab you or turn you off in a real life context. And speaking of context, in most tropical countries, sheep don't even exist and so for the Gospel reading, some Christians in those countries use translations like "I am the Good Pig Herder," which makes a lot more sense. Pigs in such places are like sheep to Bedouins, sheep to shepherds. Without caring pig herders, life would be extremely difficult in those places. To speak of the "Lamb of God" or the "Good Shepherd" in say, New Guinea, makes absolutely no sense.

II

So, all that's well and good, but what do we do – here, now? We could bag the symbol because we can't relate to it. But that's a pretty lame and lazy way out of things, so let's try and get behind the image, get at its meanings. Let me try and do so very briefly through two points. First, it's important to realize that the intent of the symbol of the shepherd is to show that there is a relationship of caring. The Good Shepherd, primarily and fundamentally, cares about those who have been entrusted to him or her. The shepherd has an intensely personal investment in the sheep. Like God.

If there is anything we can say about the Mystery who is God, is that God intimately and deeply desires to live with us, love us, be loved by us and to take care of us. How much so? That he'd lay down his life for us, to die for us, to walk through "the valley of the shadow of death" with us, to set a "table in the presence of mine enemies." The Shepherd cares, loves, guides, protects. It's not mere flight of fancy or some kind of "this life fleeing," that the poetry of Psalm 23 and Christ's declaration that he is the Good Shepherd, has meant so much to so many for so long. These are images of power and promise that God will be with you. These symbols ring true because they are true: God does walk with you in desolate times; God does bring comfort when you are grieving; God does bring strength when all your own strength is ready to falter and you're at the end of your rope and you think you can't take another step. If you don't believe it, ask someone who has clung to these words for years or a lifetime if this image of God as Shepherd, are true or not. I know they are.

And yet, if you only look at the surface of things, you've got a problem: do you really believe that God always protects us, especially from wolves, from those who "climb in by another way [to scatter and steal]," as Jesus says in John's Gospel? Bad things do happen to good people, even under the care of the Shepherd. A long time ago, I heard of a pastor who used to love to sing, "God will take care of me/ in every way, through every day/ like a Shepherd he will keep/ watching over his sheep;" until an elderly couple in his church was robbed and murdered in their home and he simply couldn't sing that song the same way. The experience shook his faith to the core until he recently said in a sermon: "God is still my Shepherd but God isn't going to give me a risk free life or take me out of the terrors of the night. Still, I know that God is going with me in the midst of the dangers, in the midst of all the pain and suffering. God is going to suffer with me. God is there," he concluded. "This I know. This I believe. But he doesn't necessarily shoot the wolf."

Do you suppose this is what the Psalmist meant when he sang: "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies"? In the presence of the enemy. His hope was not that God would get rid of the enemy, the evil; he never says this and never even asks for it. He seems to know that those dangers and trials will always be there. His assurance comes in knowing that he isn't alone through it all, that God is with him to bring him comfort, to give him strength for the journey and to walk beside him whatever might come his way.

The second point is a reminder: it is the Shepherd who is responsible for the sheep, not the other way around. True, you and I are made for each other, to care for each other, to pray for each other and to love each other. That's such a huge part of Christian community. But sometimes, we – or I should say, I – think that we are both the shepherd and the sheep, and that we are supposed to both guide and follow and fill up the pen with more sheep. Sure that should be a concern of ours: to share love of God with others and to bear witness to the light of Christ, to seek new and more people to join us as we walk on the Way of Jesus. But deep down, don't we know that what is finally true is that you and I are not the Shepherd and that we will only be fully blessed when we remember that God is the One responsible and the ultimate Caretaker of our lives, that God goes before us like a Good Shepherd, and then, and only then, will goodness and mercy follow us all the days of our lives.

Several years ago, author Madeleine L'Engle penned a fanciful conversation between an angel and God in heaven in which we hear only the angel. It's a bit like those one-sided phone conversations we see on stage or screen. The angel is listening for a while, then says, "O God: please don't send me back to Earth again. It's terrible there. What can I do with these people? Please don't make me go back again, please! . . . What? I don't have to go? You mean it? I don't have to go? O, thank you, God, thank you! . . . What? What? You mean – You're going?"

Indeed, God is here and goes before us like a Good Shepherd.

"May goodness and mercy follow you all the days of your life."